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Editorial

Ethics and Social Welfare: The State of Play

Sarah Banks

Abstract

This extended editorial takes stock of the first volume of the journal *Ethics and Social Welfare*, offering an overview of the types of contributions in the first four issues and suggesting future themes. A critical summary is given of the contributions so far, which have included: moral philosophical theorising; analysis of key ethical concepts; exploration of contested areas of policy and practice; empirical studies of living conditions, perceptions, attitudes and professional interventions; accounts of ethical issues in practice; ethical issues in research; and models of professional ethical decision-making. Themes identified for future consideration include: service user perspectives on aspects of social welfare practice; development of practice-based ethical theories for the social welfare professions; ideas about teaching professional and practical ethics; ethical issues in managing and distributing resources; critical analysis of the ethical implications of public policies; further contributions offering moral, political and social philosophical perspectives on issues of social justice, cultural diversity, global and local policies for tackling environmental and humanitarian crises.

Key words: ethics, social welfare, moral philosophy, social policy, professional practice.

Introduction

This journal has now completed its first year. As we begin Volume 2, we thought it appropriate to celebrate our success, including taking stock of the content so far, the work that has been accomplished to achieve this and possible themes for future issues.

We would like to thank all those who have contributed through work on the editorial and advisory boards, refereeing articles and, above all, writing for the early issues of the journal. It is a leap of faith to submit the fruits of hard intellectual labour to a new and untested journal, and we are grateful to those who were willing to do this before ever seeing a published copy. We hope we have done justice to these contributions and that they form a firm foundation for developing the journal into its second year of publication and beyond. The fact that people have been able and willing to write for the journal suggests that its theme – *Ethics and Social Welfare* – provides a focus for reflection, theorising and questioning that has both relevance and currency in the present academic, policy and practice climates.

Taking stock

In our editorial at the start of the first issue (Banks, Clifford, Bisman & Preston-Shoot, 2007) we invited contributions taking a range of approaches, of which we listed five possibilities. The aim of making such a categorisation was to encourage a variety of different articles and to outline the terrain we felt the journal might cover; it also served as a kind of 'stock-taking' of the state of the field of 'ethics and social welfare' and an optimistic prediction about the kinds of contributions we might receive. We will now consider what progress the journal has made in relation to the five types of possible contributions we identified earlier: moral philosophical theorising; analysis of key ethical concepts; exploration of contested areas of policy and practice; empirical studies of living conditions, perceptions, attitudes and professional interventions; and accounts of ethical issues in practice. We have also added two further categories to our original list to reflect the content of the first four issues: ethical issues in research; and models of professional ethical decision-making.

1. *Moral philosophical theorising relevant to matters of social welfare, for example, the evaluation and development of theoretical approaches to ethics such as those based on virtue, duty, consequences, care, community or major world religions.*

Several articles have focussed on an ethical theory or theoretical approach, developed it and suggested applications to our understanding of professional practice, mainly in the social work field. In this issue, for example, Thompson sketches out some of the main features of existentialist ethics, drawing particularly on the thinking of Nietzsche and Sartre, linking these to contemporary social work concerns. This leads to exploring the value of an 'ethics of uncertainty', involving a fluid approach, tailored to specific circumstances; an approach to ethics that is firmly linked with politics; and an ethics of empowerment (drawing on Nietzsche's concept of 'self-overcoming' and Sartre's emphasis on freedom and authenticity). In the previous issue, Gray and Lovat (2007) also focus on ethics in social work, but they argue for virtue ethics as an alternative to what they see as 'rule-bound' deontological and utilitarian consequentialist approaches to ethics. They link virtue ethics with Habermas's discourse ethics, seeing his consensus-seeking procedures for communicative action as a project to create conditions for human flourishing. Their version of virtue ethics, offers, they argue, a 'stance' for social work to deal with intractable moral conflicts in an increasingly uncertain world. While Graham (2007), in issue number 2, offers a new analysis of the ethics of care from a black women's perspective, thus challenging the feminist ethics of care to take account of the gendered dimensions of racism that are an integral part of black women's lived experiences. Graham outlines an African-centred ethics of care, drawing on the ethical philosophies and principles of Ma'at (an ancient philosophical and spiritual knowledge system based on key values of interrelatedness, interdependence and interconnectedness) and outlining

the implications of these new perspectives for the giving and receiving of care.

All three of these articles explore theoretical approaches to ethics that take account of context, the moral qualities of the agent and the nature of relationships (existentialist ethics, virtue ethics and the ethics of care). This reflects the growing attention being paid in moral philosophy towards more situated approaches to ethics, which are now also being applied to professional ethics. While there are some detailed accounts that develop these ethical approaches in the context of social welfare policy and practice (for example, Graham, 2002; Sevenhuisen, 1998; Thompson, 1992), there is scope for more practice-based theorising to develop some of the ideas further, particularly in the social work and social care field.

2. Exploration and analysis of key ethical concepts.

Several articles in previous issues have taken one or more core concepts in ethics or professional ethics, located them within relevant literature and practice situations, offered a conceptual analysis and given them a particular gloss. In the first issue, Koggel (2007) offers an analysis of the concepts of 'empowerment', 'advocacy' and 'globalisation' and then uses these concepts in her critical examination of some of the recent work of the World Bank, in contrast with the practice of a locally-based Indonesian NGO undertaking empowerment work. Clark (2007) examines 'professional responsibility', 'misconduct' and 'practical reason', taking as his starting point a report of a case of the death of a child. He suggests that the failures in professional conduct and responsibility can be understood as failures of practical reason. Finally Beckett (2007) explores 'realism' as an ethical obligation in social work – alluding to some of the specialist philosophical meanings of the term (realism versus idealism in theory of knowledge, for example), while mainly working with several ordinary language uses of the term (realism versus rhetoric; realism versus optimism; realism versus impracticality; realism versus exaggeration; realism versus simplicity; realism versus pretence), arguing that social workers should be 'realistic' in all of these senses about the process and outcomes of their work..

The focus on one or more key concepts does not necessarily commit the authors to an ethical theory or theoretical approach. It is a useful contribution to developing our thinking about the meaning of many of the frequently used concepts of ethical significance in policy and practice that are often used loosely, carelessly or inconsistently. There is a need for more careful and stimulating work of this kind, using the skills and insights of good philosophical analysis, alongside detailed illustrative examples from actual policy and practice (as opposed to the hypothetical examples so beloved of philosophers). Further practice-based contributions that explore concepts such as human flourishing, human capabilities, social welfare and social justice would be welcomed in future issues.

3. *Exploration of problematic and contested areas of public policy or professional practice with a focus on the ethical issues involved.*

Parrott's article in this issue falls into this category. He discusses the current stress in British social policy on partnership working and the ethical issues this raises for practitioners from different professions who need to communicate, understand each other and work together. Interestingly, Parrott identifies Habermas's theory of communicative action as a model for encouraging consensus-seeking dialogue between partners in health and social care work. In the first issue, Munroe (2007) examines trends in British child welfare policy to take power away from families and shift it towards the state and professional decision-making, considering the implications of this move for professional confidentiality. While MacDonald (2007) considers the impact of the British Human Rights Act (1998) on decision-making in adult social care, Buchanan and Gunn (2007), in issue 2, examine the challenges and opportunities for a rights-based approach in the context of services for children and for parents with learning difficulties. Koggel's (2007) research on the implications of World Bank policies also falls into this category of article with a focus on contested areas of policy and practice.

Further contributions would be welcomed on developments in social policy, especially comparative studies and discussions of international and global policy trends, with a clear focus on the ethical dimensions. Themes might range from examination of the impact of managerialist regimes on professional ethics, to the implications of international agreements on climate change for communities in different parts of the globe.

4. *Empirical studies of aspects of people's living conditions; perceptions and attitudes of the public, service users, professionals, policy makers; professional interventions that have a focus on social welfare and ethical issues.*

This category of article is the most popular so far, with seven articles focusing on reporting empirical research. In this issue, Whiting reports on his research on religious values in social work organisations. Earlier issues featured the results of McLaren's (2007) research on social workers' attitudes towards and handling of the issue of forewarning service users about the limits to confidentiality in suspected child abuse cases; Jawad's (2007) study of some of the ethical features of social welfare regimes in Lebanon; Mantle (2007) on tensions in the family court between the protection and empowerment of children; Charnley (2007) on the roles and performance of international NGOs working with children separated from their families by war in Mozambique; and Bradford's (2007) historical research on concepts of the 'good youth worker' in England during the period 1939-45.

We particularly welcome empirical studies of this kind and hope that the developing theoretical and conceptual analyses found in other articles in the journal will assist in developing more nuanced and detailed ethical

frameworks that can be used and further developed in empirical research. The inter-relationship between empirical research, moral philosophical analysis and theoretical ethics is another sub-theme that is of growing interest in both philosophical and practice-based literature on ethics and bears further development.

5. *Accounts of practice or personal experience from social welfare practitioners and service users that identify ethical concerns and dilemmas.*

This category of writing has mainly appeared in the 'ethical issues in practice' section of the journal, which, if we include this issue, has so far featured 16 shorter articles contributed by people in the roles of student, service user, carer, social work and youth work practitioner, teacher and academic. This section is providing a rich selection of accounts of ethical issues in practice, ranging from Ward's account of the ethics of secret filming in this issue, to the experience of mental health recovery in volume 1, issue 2 (Fox, 2007). The reflective and often very honest style of these pieces is thought-provoking and can be regarded as part of an ongoing process of collecting and reflecting on cases and accounts that is at the very heart of the ethics of practice (whether that be professional practice or the practice of ordinary life).

We invite further reflective accounts of ethical issues in practice, which take the form of a description of an issue, situation or case and some reflections on the ethical implications. For these kinds of pieces, we do not necessarily require references to academic or professional literature. We are more concerned with authentic accounts of experiences; and our practice editors are willing to work with people who wish to contribute to this section of the journal. We are particularly keen to encourage service users and carers to write for the journal; and we hope the Jo Campling Memorial Prize being offered by the journal for a student essay (see p. X) will encourage contributions from students.

6. *Reflecting on ethical issues in research*

This was a category we did not list separately in our first editorial, but it is clearly a topical and emerging theme across all disciplines, with practice-based research conducted by academics with a professional background in social welfare work providing particularly interesting issues for discussion. Research ethics is an area of on-going concern and interest, as awareness has increased of the need to protect research participants from harm and to ensure the integrity of research processes and outcomes. We have seen a mushrooming of regulations, guidelines and procedures, and their policing by research ethics committees. These regulatory processes, which are developing across many parts of the world, provide opportunities for the study of the principles and practices of research governance and the challenges these pose for researchers, as reported by Part and Comben (2007) in their contribution to first issue of the journal on social work research in a British health care setting. The

demand for detailed specifications of research designs in advance, and a lack of familiarity of some committees with qualitative research, often makes these procedures seem not only burdensome, but positively antithetical to flexible and participative social research.

Social welfare practitioners and academics have particular interests and sensitivities in conducting research with service users, seeing ethics in research as needing to mirror ethics in practice – with further complications, especially if the approach is participative and action-oriented, or if the participants are particularly vulnerable. Munford et al in this issue give an account of the carefully planned and ethically sensitive approach they took to a qualitative study of the parenting experiences of parents with an intellectual disability. Their account demonstrates the importance of thinking through the ethical issues raised in any piece of research, and what can be done to ensure that research participants are valued and empowered during and as a result of the research process. In the second issue of the journal, McLaughlin (2007) discusses some of the ethical issues in involving young service users as co-researchers, showing how similar issues arise in participative research (respect, power-sharing, honesty, informed consent) as in practice with young people. We have no doubt that reflection on the ethics of social research will be the subject of future articles, particularly as academics in the social welfare field are increasingly undertaking practice-based research.

7. Developing models for ethical practice or ethical decision-making

The development of ethical decision-making models is another theme that we did not identify on our original list of different types of contribution to the journal. In professional ethics, the development of models to help practitioners make difficult ethical decisions has been quite popular, with a number having been developed for social work and related professions. These usually appear in textbooks, and outline several steps to be taken or stages to be accomplished involving gaining relevant information, thinking through issues and priorities with reference to principles in professional codes or ethical theories and rehearsing outcomes or consequences. McAuliffe and Chenoweth, in this issue, review some of these models, before presenting their own 'Inclusive Model of Ethical Decision-Making' for social work. This model rests on four key 'platforms': accountability; consultation; cultural sensitivity; and critical reflection, and uses a dynamic five-step reflective process to identify and analyse 'all relevant aspects of an ethical dilemma'.

Whilst ethical decision-making models often seem mechanistic and artificial - more suited for use in the classroom than the home, street or social care institution - they do help raise awareness of the myriad of factors and perspectives involved in any professional decision. Classroom rehearsals involving systematic analyses of ethical problems and dilemmas can help improve ethical reasoning and hence decision-making in practice. The development of new critical models is important: models that move beyond simplistic, rational deductive accounts of moral

reasoning; that take account of the co-construction of issues and problems; that leave room for emotional and culturally sensitive responses; and encourage reflexivity on the part of professionals to see themselves as engaged participants rather than neutral and impartial decision-makers. It is likely that in future there will be a continuation of this trend towards the development of less structured and more discursive and participative models of communication and decision-making between service users and professionals, with a focus on narratives and stories, for example.

Conclusions: where next?

Looking ahead over the next few years, we hope to attract a range of articles that build on and develop these themes, and some that surprise us and take us in new directions. Above all, we hope to generate ideas, debate and enthusiasm for this rather specialised, yet at the same time, all-embracing field of *Ethics and Social Welfare*.

As noted in the editorial in the first issue, we deliberately chose the rather broad title, *Ethics and Social Welfare*, to ensure our focus went beyond simply social work and the other social professions operating in the community, youth, caring and social pedagogical fields. Ethics as a practice and as a discipline (subject of study) can never be divorced from politics. In future issues we hope to feature more of the ongoing ethico-political debates about the nature of human welfare or well-being; the role of the state, voluntary and non-governmental organisations, communities and families in caring for individuals and groups experiencing vulnerability or crises; the implications of increased voluntary and forced migration; debates about cultural relativism; and controversial public policies for social inclusion and exclusion. We hope, therefore, to include contributions that address issues in political philosophy, public and social policy.

Teaching and learning about ethics in professional and academic educational contexts is another area that could be further developed. As professional ethics grows as a discipline in its own right, then we might expect further more detailed studies of and guides to learning and teaching about professional ethics in the social welfare professions. Similarly, as interest in 'applied ethics' grows rapidly, so do new ways of teaching and learning in 'academic' subject areas such as moral and political philosophy and theology.

Ethics in the management of professional practice, as well as the management and distribution of scarce resources at regional, national and global levels, are all areas where further thinking and empirical research will be useful. We invite you, therefore, to join us in reading and reflecting on the articles presented in this issue, and to consider making a contribution yourself in the future. We are particularly keen to encourage contributions from different parts of the world – to go beyond an Anglo-American-Australasian focus and to engage with scholars and practitioners in Africa, Asia, Central and South America and other parts of Europe. We recognise that in many parts of the world 'ethics' is conceived of differently, and may be conceptually

inseparable from religion, culture or politics. We need articles that engage with these issues, that may even challenge the applicability and usefulness of the very concept of 'ethics' itself and that consider the possibilities and difficulties of global dialogues on the theme of 'ethics'.

We appreciate the difficulties of writing in English and are prepared to offer support for authors whose first language is not English. We also urge all contributors to situate their articles, where relevant, in their particular national, cultural and policy contexts, and not to assume that their own familiar practices and ideas are equally familiar to readers in other parts of the globe. While we expect accounts of practice, empirical research and contested areas of policy to be specific to a place, time and way of thinking, as far as possible we hope the analyses offered may go beyond merely local or parochial concerns.

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